

# I Thought I Knew Everything About Driving

By LCdr. Jerry Chapmon,  
Naval Safety Center

**H**aving driven for almost 27 years, in nearly every state of the union and under all kinds of weather and traffic conditions, I considered myself a skilled and safe driver. I thought I could maneuver my high-performance sedan around any hazardous situation and avoid an accident.

Since reporting to the Naval Safety Center, though, I've become aware of how many risks I've been taking and how, at any moment, I could become another motor-vehicle mishap statistic.

I anticipated my tour of duty at Naval Safety Center, but I never thought it would affect something I daily take for granted. My safe-driving wake-up call came when I started reviewing motor-vehicle mishap reports. In 22 years of naval service, I never had viewed message traffic from the whole Navy. Thus, mishaps and their severity never had seemed significant until now. The number of

mishaps for even one day is alarming, especially in the motor-vehicle community.

Last year alone, we lost 67 shipmates in traffic crashes—that's a \$10-million loss to our Navy when you consider the training costs and then the immeasurable grief families and friends have to bear. I couldn't help wondering how many of those tragic losses could have been avoided. What are we, as leaders, doing to educate our Sailors, and what role are we playing as shipmates in reducing these alarming numbers?

I started looking at my own driving habits, questioning whether I'm really as safe as I had thought. **My wife recently let me know that she no longer feels safe in the car when I'm driving. "Am I that bad?" I wondered.**

I spent the next few days analyzing my every driving habit. I evaluated my actual speed, compared to the posted limit and the existing road

conditions. I noted all distractions I let occur while driving: using cell phone, eating and reading, to name a few. I considered how courteous I am to other drivers. I wanted to know if I'm the type of driver others need to watch out for.

After three days of analyzing my own driving habits, I felt ashamed, disappointed and angry with myself for putting my family and others at risk. Ironically, I was assigned to develop motor-vehicle safety presentations to be given during our safety surveys. "How can I promote motor-vehicle safety when I act like an idiot behind the wheel?" I thought.

I spent the next week collecting data from the Department of Transportation, our Naval Safety Center database, and the Army Safety Center's website. The numbers were revealing and proved the value of many advertised safety features we've been hearing about for years. For example, safety belts do save lives—164,000 since 1975.

But, despite cars being safer, they also are faster. Mix that speed with alcohol, and you have a lethal formula. Despite more driver-education programs for new drivers, fatalities among our youngest drivers still are rising. As for motorcycles, there's nothing safe about them.

My task was clear: I first had to modify my driving. Second, I had to assemble two presentations that would emphasize risks, identify those most at risk, and present what we, as leaders and supervisors, are doing to pass the word to Sailors.

Acknowledging my own poor driving habits was a welcome relief to my family. Although that admission wasn't easy, I do find myself more relaxed now when driving, and I'm more courteous, even when I'm stuck in one of our typical Tidewater traffic snarls. I'm proud of my new traffic-safety awareness, and I'm relieved it didn't take a tragedy to bring me to my senses.

What about my shipmates in the fleet, though? How can we prevent their deaths and senseless suffering from motor-vehicle mishaps?

We realize that legislation alone will not reduce the numbers. It takes urgency and assertive awareness from an engaged command to reduce motor-vehicle mishaps. The Navy's governing instruction is OpNavInst 5100.12G (Navy Traffic Safety Program), but numerous helpful resources also exist from the Department of Transportation and the Naval Safety Center.

As outlined in OpNavInst 5100.12G, commands must designate, in writing, a command traffic-safety coordinator, who is required to track motor-vehicle mishap trends and to provide that data for review by the CO and the command's safety council. The data then enables the command to identify high-risk drivers and to assign them to driver-improvement classes. Records also should be maintained for motorcycle operators and those who have completed the required motorcycle-safety rider course. The traffic-safety coordinator stays aware of current trends by attending regional and his own traffic-safety council meetings.

It takes initiative, planning, training, and continuous reinforcement to reduce our mishap rate.



**Department heads, division officers, and chief petty officers also have a front-line position in the war against motor-vehicle mishaps. The close working relationship between junior Sailors and their division officers and chiefs affords an opportunity to educate the young Sailors about applying ORM to off-duty vehicle operation. Division officers and chiefs must make sure the records of all newly reporting personnel document the DoD-required four hours of motor-vehicle safety training. They also should encourage young Sailors to use the buddy system and designated-driver program.**

If you're in a leadership position, review your Sailors' travel plans before you sign their leave or special-liberty papers. Periodically hold mini-safety stand-downs to reaffirm driver and vehicle safety. It takes initiative, planning, training, and continuous reinforcement to reduce our mishap rate.

We must show our Sailors the consequences of their behavior, such as drinking and driving, speeding, and other reckless actions. We must promote courteous and thoughtful driving habits—we must set good examples for them to follow. It takes years of training and thousands of dollars to replace a Sailor we lose in one senseless act, and we never can repair the loss felt by family, friends and shipmates. ■